

Aging-Services Providers as “Forces for Good”



Leslie Crutchfield

A few years ago Leslie Crutchfield, managing director of the Ashoka Global Academy for Social Entrepreneurship, needed information about the characteristics of great not-for-profits—organizations that had lasting impact far beyond most of their peers. Though inspired by Jim Collins’ landmark book, *Good to Great*, she was disappointed to find little information about how or why the best not-for-profits maximized their impact.

With co-author Heather McLeod Grant, Crutchfield launched a project to identify and better understand what they call “high-impact nonprofits.” The result is their book, *Forces for Good: The Six Practices of High-Impact Nonprofits*.

Crutchfield will be a keynote speaker at AAHSA’s Future of Aging Services Conference & Exposition, Apr. 20-22, in Washington, D.C. *FutureAge* talked with Crutchfield about her concept of high-impact nonprofits.

FutureAge: Aging-services providers are always concerned about maximizing their impact, in keeping with the theme of your book. However, in today’s economic environment, many providers are simply concerned with survival. How can not-for-profits implement your vision in such a tough environment?

Leslie Crutchfield: In good or bad economic times, not-for-profits that want to be successful are always challenged with balancing the basics. But in a tough economy, some practices we write about become much more relevant. One is nurturing not-for-profit networks, concerning how [providers] relate to “competitors.” The high-impact groups don’t view others that way. The opportunity here is for member organizations to think about who they can partner with, how to share resources to advance the future of aging.

The other thing that speaks to your question is advocacy. With a shrinking economy and budget, if you’re not already actively advocating, not just for funding but for interests of constituents, that voice won’t be heard.

How do you start to draw the circle bigger so you’re not just looking at aging services organizations? If the true “competitors” of aging services are children’s issues, the common thread is a huge risk of poverty. You’re talking about improving life conditions for the elderly and children. Can you find broader solutions that reach more organizations?

One thing I’m curious about is how you engage individual evangelists, high-impact practice number three. High-impact not-for-profits do invest and engage individuals, but they also spend a lot of resources to engage high-profile people. Habitat for Humanity was basically a local concern until Jimmy Carter got involved, to the point that people now see Jimmy Carter as “the founder” of Habitat. Are there opportunities for associations, collectively and individually, to engage such individuals?

And can that be leveraged for business partnership and advocacy?

FA: For a long-established faith-based or fraternal provider organization, one that traditionally may have been seen as an old-fashioned “charity,” what is the key to evolving to a “high-impact philanthropy” mindset?

LC: It’s advocacy at an individual level. At least half the organizations in our book started as direct service providers in a local community, or in the developing world. With Habitat for Humanity, it started with getting volunteers to band together and build houses. [Then] it gets into the question of a larger mission. In the last decade, they’ve gotten more involved in advocacy, mobilizing members to advocate for affordable housing in local areas.

What we saw in the great nonprofits we studied is that they were driven to have as much impact as they could, but if they left advocacy and policy work off the table they couldn’t make that change.

Our central thesis is that the great ones are concerned with building a larger movement and advancing a larger cause. They are operating in a larger constellation of issues.

FA: In your work you talk about high-impact not-for-profit leaders, describing them as “social entrepreneurs.” As we work to develop the next generation of leaders in aging services, what characteristics should we be looking for?

LC: You should be looking for leaders who can work deftly across all sectors, who not only see business as a potential ally, but are open to speaking the language of business and developing partnerships. Similarly, they must understand government policy and the nonprofit world. The great nonprofits [we studied] were good in all these areas. The common threads have to do with psychological orientation rather than professional background. All but one of these leaders had advanced degrees and they were also very entrepreneurial.

They are leaders who are driven to achieve wide-scale systemic social change. It’s not just about expanding services, it is about creating larger systemic change. That’s why they are interested in leveraging the policy realm, or looking at the business sector and how it operates as a force for good.

The psychology of these leaders is very much one of being able to sublimate the ego. In most cases we saw these leaders as being about getting the larger win or advancing the cause rather than always being in the spotlight. That’s where we see a lot of overlap between our findings and Jim Collins’ research. That type of leadership is going to be evident in the leaders we develop from an early age, as opposed to “skills” developed over time. **FA:**

To register or learn more about the 2009 AAHSA Future of Aging Services Conference & Exposition, visit www.aahsa.org/fasc. For more on Crutchfield and McLeod’s book, *Forces for Good*, visit www.forcesforgood.net.